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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000046

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN OPPOSITION ELDER STATESMAN ASSESSES CURRENT  
SITUATION, UPCOMING ELECTIONS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin, per 1.4 b,d.

11. (C) Summary: Senior opposition figure Riad Turk told A/DCM January 10 that the internal opposition has been weakened over the past year by regime repression, although he did not believe the condition was permanent. In his view the SARG is isolated and in a state of crisis because of its international situation and could be weakened if it faced setbacks in Lebanon. Turk expressed appreciation for the mid-December White House statement in support of human rights and democracy in Syria and called for more indications of public support, especially in solidarity with like-minded countries and international human rights organizations. Turk discounted the possibility that spring parliamentary elections (and a presidential referendum) would open any political space for the opposition to ease out of the repression it is currently facing, but acknowledged that some opposition elements disagreed and wanted to participate in the elections. Turk described the Damascus Declaration group as weakened by a stark lack of consensus on key positions. End Summary.

12. (C) OPPOSITION WEAKER THAN A YEAR AGO: Senior opposition figure Riad Turk, imprisoned by the SARG for over 20 years, told A/DCM January 10 that the internal opposition in Syria is under tremendous SARG pressure and is weaker than it was even one year ago. He described most people in the opposition or sympathetic to it as completely intimidated by the SARG'S intensified use of the standard tools of repression, including travel bans, summons for interrogation, surveillance, short-term detention, and long-term imprisonment. Turk described the regime as weakened internationally, isolated, and facing a crisis situation abroad, with its domestic policies reflecting its desire to have complete quiet and lack of movement on political reform. The opposition is "walking in place," or even "in retreat," although in Turk's view, the condition is not permanent. The internal opposition's situation could improve with a change in circumstances, if for example, the SARG's position deteriorates in Lebanon or Iraq.

13. (C) EXPRESSES APPRECIATION FOR WHITE HOUSE STATEMENT: Turk expressed appreciation for the mid-December White House statement on the human rights in Syria, calling it helpful. He urged the USG to continue to speak out in this manner and to find ways to work with other like-minded governments, especially in Europe, and with international and Arab human rights organizations to keep up the public pressure on the Syrian regime to respect human rights, release political prisoners, and move towards political reform and democracy. Turk noted that he would likely have died in prison or been

executed by Hafez al-Asad's regime, without sustained international public pressure on his behalf. Turk urged Secretary Rice to make a statement on Syria while on her trip

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in the region, suggesting that she express support for democracy and human rights in Syria, the release of all political prisoners, and a solution to the Golan issue, and call for Syria not to interfere in Lebanon or to allow its border to be used by foreign fighters (or Syrians) destabilizing Iraq. He also urged the Secretary to express further support for the establishment of the Special Lebanon Tribunal to try the killers of Rafik al-Hariri. If there is an eventual thawing in relations between Syria and the U.S., Turk urged that any U.S. re-engagement be linked to the need of Syrians for freedom and democracy and protection of their basic human rights.

14. (C) WHY THE MEDIA EMBARGO ON OPPOSITION IN SYRIA?: When asked why the Syrian opposition is not well known regionally and is ignored by the regional Arab language media, including satellite stations like al-Jazeera and al-Arabiyya, Turk responded that the Syrian regime has succeeded in enforcing a media blackout on the internal opposition (although Turk denied that the internal opposition is not well-known in the region). Any foreign correspondent who dared interview Turk or other opposition figures would be sent home and any Syrian journalist would be harassed and possibly imprisoned. Turk did think that if a documentary, with a series of interviews with Syrian opposition figures could be made, without attribution or some anonymity about the producer or director, regional satellite television would air it.

15. (C) UPCOMING ELECTIONS: TO RUN OR NOT TO RUN?: Regarding the upcoming parliamentary elections and the

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presidential referendum, expected in the spring, Turk expressed pessimism that these developments would allow any "political space" for the opposition to ease out from under the repression it is facing or to get out its message to a broader Syrian audience. He saw no benefit to be gained from participating in what he termed a charade. On the parliamentary elections, he noted a series of obstacles that would block the opposition from meaningful participation or garnering any political benefit, including control by the security services and the regime over who would be able to run, similar control over all statements that could be issued and elections meetings that could be held. Under the Emergency Law, people could be arrested merely for attending a small campaign rally or a meeting in someone's apartment, observed Turk. The Ba'ath Party, as constitutionally enshrined ruling party, is automatically entitled to 50 percent of all seats and the National Progressive Front is entitled to another quarter of the seats, he insisted. There would be little or no real competition over the remaining seats for independents, with just a few rich businessmen jousting among themselves for spoils and prestige, since the regime would likely circulate official and "unofficial lists" that would signal to voters (and potential candidates) the approved "independents," lamented Turk. The SARG would prohibit many people from running and would "cheat" shamelessly, using multiple voting, fraud, and control over ballot boxes to ensure that there were no surprises, he added.

16. (C) Despite this litany of obstacles, Turk did not rule out completely the utility of some opposition elements trying to exploit the elections to increase their room for political maneuver and communication with the Syrian people at a time when the regime is under some degree of international scrutiny and interested (temporarily) in putting forward a more positive image. While his Syrian Communist Party (one of several Communist parties in Syria) had decided to boycott the elections, other opposition parties were considering participating, including several Kurdish parties and Hassan

Abdul Azim's Democratic Arab Socialist Union (pan-Arabist in orientation, with musty, oddly anachronistic Nasserist tendencies that still flavor some of the party's rhetoric) , said Turk.

17. (C) Amin Mardini, a fellow opposition figure and a former political prisoner like Turk (imprisoned for 15 years), who sat in on the meeting, added that the elections would be "pure theater," with no real competition. (Note: The meeting took place at Mardini's apartment. While it was underway, Mardini's "mukhabbarat contact" called and "summoned" him for a meeting in the coming days. Turk smiled when asked if he too had to maintain such contact, saying "I don't see them and they don't try to see me." Mardini expressed doubt that the summons was connected to A/DCM's meeting with Turk, despite the curious timing of the call.) Turk noted that as for the Presidential referendum, Bashar al-Asad would be "imposed by force," with no alternative candidate. Despite his party's boycott, Turk and others in his party still intended to criticize the regime for the lack of democracy in the elections.

18. (C) DAMASCUS DECLARATION GROUP WEAKENED BY OPPOSING VIEWS: Asked to assess the influence of the Damascus Declaration (DD) group, of which he is a member, Turk said the group was weakened by a stark lack of consensus, with members maintaining "contradictory positions." An important DD component, Hassan Abdul Azim's coterie (representing the pan-Arabist Democratic Arab Socialist Union described above), opposed any calls for confronting the regime or trying to escalate. On Iraq, they were actually supporters of Saddam and the Baathists. Regarding Lebanon, they did not like the March 14 group, backing Hizballah instead. Turk asked rhetorically, how can part of the opposition, which overall is struggling for democracy and freedom, tolerate views in support of Saddam or in opposition to the Lebanese state and its democratic institutions? In Turk's view, the Damascus Declaration group needed internal discussions to try to limit its contradictory positions and to move towards a more confrontational position with the regime. In his view, "there is no benefit" in being in the opposition but not saying anything publicly against the regime.

19. (C) COMMENT: Septuagenarian Turk is probably the most implacable opponent the Bashar al-Asad regime faces. Unlike

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most opposition figures, he does not hedge his bets by periodically meeting with security services handlers and is not afraid to speak out publicly in harsh terms to criticize the regime. He lambasted the regime in a widely-watched al-Hurra interview he granted while traveling in Europe last year but was not, as far as we know, harassed or imprisoned upon his return, although he did apparently wait a few months for temperatures to cool before attempting to return. The regime is afraid to re-imprison him because of his relatively fragile health and his international stature, especially in Europe (the result to some extent of his long-standing affiliations with leftist and human rights groups there). Turk, unlike most opposition figures, is almost never the subject of gossip and backbiting speculation among others in the opposition that he is somehow collaborating with regime elements or with foreign powers. His quarter-of-a-century imprisonment and continuing public defiance of the regime have immunized him against the paranoia, jealousies, and manipulation by the security services that infect so much of the enfeebled opposition. Turk's advanced age and strongly secular view (and communist background) probably prevent him from assuming any future mantle of leadership in Syria. (He does not speak any English, unlike many in the internal opposition who taught themselves English in prison). Nonetheless, he is a powerful, unique figure whose example at the present time provides quiet encouragement to an otherwise cowed, isolated Syrian opposition.

110. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: Turk's dismissive views on the

usefulness of opposition participation in the upcoming elections are not universally shared in the opposition, although they do represent one dominant view. The other view, shared by Riad Seif and others in the Damascus Declaration group, is that the parliamentary elections can be manipulated by the opposition to an extent, because the regime will want to try to create a positive image internationally. Hence, participation that could be used to embarrass the regime and create more political space for the opposition should not be ruled out (reported septel).

CORBIN